

## Empowering students for citizenship

Students do projects for the local community and learn to take responsibility as active citizens in the Kuresaare Gymnasium in Estonia.

### Summary

Kuresaare Gymnasium in Estonia encourages teachers to carry out civic activity projects for their local community. The idea is to give an opportunity for students to work in groups and practice their 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (such as creativity, digital competences and critical thinking), while encouraging them to take responsibility as active citizens. Furthermore, the school encourages these projects to be interdisciplinary to create more opportunities for teachers to work together and learn from each other. Throughout the project teachers are encouraged to use digital tools to collect information on students' work and make a formative assessment to adapt the activities to each team's needs. In turn, students are encouraged to use digital tools in creating social advertisement material and assessing themselves and their peers' work.

### The policy context

Estonian national education strategies place a high level of importance on formative assessment. Both formative assessment and digital competences are included in the national curricula, not as targets to meet but as guidelines to highlight best practices. The curriculum emphasises that educators shall provide students with feedback throughout the school day in order to support the formation of the students' behaviour, attitudes and values.

Schools in Estonia are generally run by the municipal government but have wide autonomy from both the central government as well as from the municipal level to organise their work.

Teachers are generally expected to develop students' digital competences within the subjects they teach according to their subject area curriculum. Training for this has been provided by the state for decades, although schools are free to choose their own priorities. Alternatively, a school can decide to teach digital competences as a separate subject.

For anyone in a school to support the use of formative assessment in a school, they first need to share a common understanding of it with other stakeholders. This might vary between schools but needs to be understood as universally as possible within a particular school and the surrounding partners/stakeholders: administration, teachers, students, parents. Generally, the municipal



governments in Estonia do not get involved with assessment and it is up to the school to coordinate an approach.

## The school context

The [Kuresaare Gymnasium](#) is a municipal secondary school on an island in western Estonia, in a small and relatively rural community. School management is made up of the school head along with up to ten staff members of the school.

Like all schools in Estonia, Kuresaare Gymnasium has designed their own school curriculum based on the state curriculum. It emphasises the importance of formative assessment and has been molded to the school's requirements. The prerequisite for the implementation of formative assessment is a list of criteria of learning outcomes and competences. For better implementation of formative assessment, the school urges teachers to participate in training sessions outside the school, but also organises in-service training.

The school management understands why formative assessment is important and creates an effective plan to involve all stakeholders. The school management relies on teachers to co-create a whole-school approach which is meaningful for their teaching.

Naturally, there is a multitude of different teachers with varying levels of eagerness to participate in the development of the school's curriculum and approaches to assessment. However, it is up to the management to involve as many staff members as possible in the process. The broadest effect and mandate is acquired by getting as many staff members as possible to authentically contribute.

## Project-based learning

Many Estonian schools have a project week during the school year. The project can either be to organise an event (e.g., a competition, a performance, a family day), a charity (e.g., improving something, helping someone), an information campaign or something else. Some concrete examples would be student-led initiatives like a charity drive or family day (families contribute at a fair by selling and buying pastries for example) in support of a local animal shelter, Christmas card competition and sales for similar purposes, or a style week in the colour of a particular awareness effort to raise attention of some issue.

In many cases, the projects focus on issues of civic engagement such as:

- Different cultures



- The Estonian and Russian school and communities: sensitive topics in history, historical memory, historical consciousness, a multi-perspective history
- Social exclusion
- People with special needs
- The age gap in society, the problem of loneliness
- Young and talented people leaving Estonia (How to reverse the process?)

In the same vein, the Kuresaare Gymnaisum wanted to encourage students to think about real-life problems and to help them realise that they can actually make a change. Real-life problems in everyday learning situations are also directed towards the digital world. How to critically evaluate information sources, stay safe online, etc.

However, using real-world issues and having students practice project/problem-based learning is considered time-consuming by most teachers. Therefore, most teaching is not performed using such methods.

The priority was set by the teacher but the school has listed the main priority of the school as “Initiative and co-operation skills are valued in the school, the aim of teaching and educational work is to develop skills that increase the ability to cope in the world.” In other words, it is about developing student agency over their life and the impact they believe they can have on their surrounding environment.

## Research – Developing assessment literacy

Project-based learning can span over a longer period of time, for example, with a project that continues throughout a semester. This can provide the time and opportunities for teachers to try different tools for digital formative assessment and find more meaningful ways of using them. A range of evaluations done in the early 2000s found that a majority of teachers tended to use new technologies to reinforce traditional approaches to learning and assessment. For example, teachers developed superficial questions that failed to elicit understanding or possible misconceptions ([Langworthy et al., 2010](#); [Selwyn, 2010](#); [Voogt, 2009](#)). A decade later, [Ferri et al. \(2020\)](#) similarly observed that many teachers working in the context of emergency remote learning persisted with traditional, frontal teaching.

[Eyal \(2012\)](#) suggests that teachers will need to extend their assessment literacy to include digital tools. An assessment-literate teacher knows a range of methods to gather evidence of student learning (including face-to-face and digital learning environments) and understands how it may increase student motivation. Teachers should also hand over assessment responsibilities to students so that they may develop competences for self-directed learning and reflection.



## Example activity

This example is used in a social studies class, where students learn about society and try to find ways to solve problems in their surroundings. The tools used can also be adapted to other lessons and other teachers have adapted it to their classes.

The teacher used a variety of different digital tools to guide the students to engage with the task and with other students. Ideally, this form of guidance is seamless, helps to give nearly instant feedback and contributes to the teachers' ability to form and pace the lesson to the students' needs. The main obstacle that might pose a challenge is the tight timeframe – the students need to be informed and paced correctly through the lesson.

The aim of the activity, covering a range of skills, is to improve the local environment for everyone. The students have to explore different types of advertisement, analyse their content and purpose, and create their own social ad in a suitable format based on the goals they have set. In this context, social advertisement means the use of advertising to inform the public about a social issue or to influence their behaviour.

The topic of social advertisement and citizen initiative is important everywhere. The teacher encourages critical thinking and citizens' initiative to solve problems in their locality. This activity helps students to realise they are responsible for making a change in their lives, now and in the future. Changes start with each member of a community. This idea gives hope and perspective to the local community.

By discussing social advertisement, students develop their digital competences, cooperation skills, critical thinking and citizens' initiative. The activity makes use of different formative assessment tools and approaches including peer assessment.

The school can organise cross-curricular activities. This can help the youth to communicate with the wider community and find solutions together. These activities involve integrating multiple subjects. For instance, students may wish to address an environmental issue that involves aspects of biology or chemistry that they then have to tie together.

## Conclusion

The school continues to encourage civic activities in many forms. Students contribute to such practical activities as collecting food for food banks and helping the local nursing home (selling of crafts made there, performing at holiday parties, etc.).



Students learn both the role of being an active citizen and being a critical forward-looking thinker. By thinking of surroundings and offering solutions, students' own behaviour changes as well. Students learn the small ways in which they can support change in their society. This encourages both their motivation and social behaviour. The students take an active role in the learning process on finding solutions and raising awareness in the local community.

This type of project-based lessons meets curriculum aims and develops competences found in national curricula throughout Europe. Parents and the local community can get involved as a way to connect different parts of society and show that changes can happen if tackled together.



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

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